

## The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts

**Review Number:**

535

**Publish date:**

Friday, 30 June, 2006

**Author:**

Jussi M. Hanhimäki

**ISBN:**

0199272808

**Date of Publication:**

2003

**Price:**

£18.00

**Publisher:**

Oxford University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

Vanessa Walker

In *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts*, Jussi M. Hanhimäki and Odd Arne Westad present an impressive array of primary materials designed to examine the Cold War as a 'global conflict' (p. ix). Implicit in this objective is the acknowledgement that there was no single Cold War experience, but rather a wide range of perceptions and experiences, contingent upon individuals' locations, social positions and ideological proclivities. As such, Hanhimäki and Westad 'aim at a differentiation of the views of the conflict and of its significance. Emphasising difference', they argue, 'is perhaps the most important aspect of studying the Cold War' (p. ix). This volume seeks, therefore, to provide not only a variety of perspectives, but also the motivations and understandings of Cold War participants. It thereby shifts Cold War history away from how the superpowers themselves viewed the conflict to a more multifaceted account.

The book is organised into nineteen chapters, based on a particular chronological/ regional topic (e.g. 'The division of Germany', 'The Korean War and the Sino-Soviet Alliance', 'The Vietnam Wars') or theme ('Technologies, weapons, and the arms race', 'Decolonization and the Cold War', 'Cultures and mindsets', 'Spies and covert operations'). Each chapter contains a brief historical overview, followed by the documents. A short statement, contextualising and identifying relevant characters and events, introduces each document. Rather than providing the full document text, the editors often include excerpts that capture the most crucial aspects to the topic; this is intended to facilitate discussion by focusing readers on the most relevant portions of the document, and also to make room for more perspectives within this already lengthy volume. Political cartoons and illustrations supplement the documents, and each chapter concludes with a set of questions, suggesting ways to connect the documents to one another, and more general Cold War readings. In keeping with the volume's objective of presenting a global history of the Cold War, the editors selected translations of foreign language texts whenever possible, even if there were comparable English materials available (p. xv).

This book's strength is undoubtedly its offering of multiple perspectives, especially for well-established areas of Cold War history. Chapter 2, 'The Iron Curtain', for example, examines the Soviet consolidation of power in Eastern Europe and includes materials from eight different countries. While there are familiar documents, such as Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech, the chapter also contains entries exploring Finland's and Norway's reactions to the growing Soviet power after the Czech coup. The documents show that the development of the 'Iron Curtain' involved more than the Soviet Union grasping power in the region for its own geostrategic and ideological objectives. Instead they demonstrate how groups and individuals facilitated, contested and experienced this extension of Soviet control, thereby making this a story of the Eastern European people and their global relationships, rather than just a struggle between monolithic East and West.

The introduction to chapter 7, 'The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1975', likewise observes that, while the American dimension of the conflict was important, 'the origins of the Vietnam wars and a substantial part of their conduct were *Vietnamese* and *international* more than American' (p. 209). The chapter therefore begins with Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Vietnamese Independence, a document interesting not only for its historical import to the ensuing conflict, but also for its utilisation of the American and French revolutions as inspiration. It further captures the Vietnamese perspective in North Vietnamese leader Le Duan's 1965 letter to the Vietnamese Communist Party in the South, evaluating the United States position in the region. Perhaps most creative is the chapter's use of an excerpt from Bao Ninh's compelling novel *The Sorrow War* to capture the experience of North Vietnamese soldiers, a perspective rarely included in more traditional document sources. This effort to go beyond the diplomatic level is matched in the American documents. While the chapter provides US government perspectives on the situation in Vietnam from the Eisenhower to the Nixon administrations, it also includes materials to present the experiences of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Further, Norman Mailer's account of anti-war protestors' March on the Pentagon in October 1967 provides insight into the war's impact on American society. The chapter also brings the international aspects of the Vietnam War into focus by examining Chinese support for the North Vietnamese effort and the Nixon administration's attempts to put pressure on North Vietnam through Sino-Soviet-American diplomacy. Finally, an Australian, rather than an American, reports on the 1975 collapse of the South Vietnamese regime.

This work deepens many of the well-established areas of Cold War research, but there are also some familiar gaps in 'peripheral areas' that merit fuller exploration in an international history of the Cold War. This is evident in the chapter on Latin America. While this chapter illuminates well the global connections and international importance of Latin America – particularly Cuba – to the Cold War powers, its focus on larger Cold War questions inhibits a more nuanced understanding of local experiences. The documents explore Cuba's relationship with both the United States and the Soviet Union, and later, the Cuban leadership's view on other revolutionary movements in the region, such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979. This focus on Cuba, however, at times overemphasises the importance of the Cold War framework to Latin Americans.

Indeed, the story of the Cold War in Latin America is not always one of a global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union through their proxies in the region. It is also the story of the superpowers' projection of a Cold War framework onto a region often more concerned with inequalities in its own societies and the United States' regional hegemony than international Communist revolution. The volume captures this through documents such as Guatemalan president Juan Jose Arevalo's comments on American imperialism, and Chilean president Eduardo Frei's critique of the Alliance for Progress. The volume also presents one Chilean's recollection of the days following the 1973 military coup in Chile that overthrew Salvador Allende's government. Aside from these exceptions, however, the only Latin American voices in this chapter are Cuban. The volume includes the Nicaraguan revolution from the perspectives of Moscow, Havana and Washington, but not from the view of the Nicaraguans. The chapter thus leaves the impression of a US view of Latin America, rather than the region's own view of the conflict. While one must recognise the challenges of finding documents that capture the perspectives of those marginalised by the Cold War conflict, it is precisely these traditionally silenced voices that a global approach to Cold War history must incorporate. The rich body of literature from Latin America in recent decades could provide one window to contrast the Cold War lens of Washington with local Latin American perspectives. Chapter 6, 'The Korean War and the Sino-Soviet Alliance', has similar limits; the Sino-Soviet relationship and American viewpoints dominate the documents, overshadowing Korean perspectives and experiences.

The volume remedies this weak point to a degree in one of its most ambitious components – chapter 13, 'Cultures and Mindsets'. 'No single aspect of the Cold War is more important – and more difficult to understand – ' the editors write, 'than the way mindsets and cultures came to define, intensify, and prolong the conflict on a global scale' (p. 412). In the introduction, the authors note that 'the degree to which local social and political conflicts in most areas came to take on a Cold War significance is staggering ... Large groups of people came to identify themselves with the cause of one or the other of the superpowers' (p. 412). Yet this is not a simple story of alignment and wholesale adoption of Cold War paradigms by peoples around the world, but rather the appropriation of those ideas to both critique and control their own societies. Traditions, local histories and the daily challenges of each society deeply conditioned the Cold War conflict, and peoples' perceptions of it. The introduction to the chapter rightly notes that 'this makes the Cold War into much more than a one-dimensional conflict between good and evil' (p. 412).

The chapter 'Cultures and Mindsets' attempts to capture this nuance through intellectuals of the time, from both the left and the right. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Arthur Koestler's *Manifesto of the Congress for Cultural Freedom* (1950) both warn of the threats of totalitarian systems to freedom of thought and individuality. Pablo Neruda's poetry critiques the oppression of the American-backed capitalist system in Latin America and around the world. This chapter also presents the ambiguity of many individuals vis-à-vis their ideological positions. Picasso's writings, for example, demonstrate his personal struggle to reconcile the disconnect between his communist ideals and the actions of the Communist Party. One can also find here the infamous 'Kitchen Debate,' between then Vice-President Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, where dishwashers become a stand-in for the relative merits of the Soviet and American systems. There is a gripping first hand account of Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev's defection at a Paris airport in 1961. Malcolm X, Günter Grass, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Mosima 'Tokyo' Sexwale of the African National Congress, and Peter George's *Dr. Strangelove* all challenge and critique aspects of Cold War structures and conditions. While the editors acknowledge the difficulty in capturing the Cold War's intellectual and cultural aspect, this chapter is an admirable effort to provide a representative selection of the ways in which the Cold War permeated world culture and thought, often producing personal struggle, ambiguity and resistance.

The source of the volume's strength, namely its focus on multiple perspectives, also seems to be its weakness at times. While one may understand how a diverse array of figures experienced an event, such as the Vietnam conflict, the driving force and importance of that event for the larger Cold War struggle is often obscured. The domino theory, war of attrition, escalation and credibility are concepts that only make a shadowy appearance in the text. In the opening chapter on the origins of the Cold War, the editors emphasise that the conflict was not simply between the United States and the Soviet Union, but rather between 'liberal

capitalism and totalitarian socialism'; it is a struggle of ideologies, not simply of strategic manoeuvres between two adversaries (p. 1). Yet this ideological conflict comes through very little in the documents, particularly on the American side. Similarly, regional strategies are sometimes overshadowed by the focus on individual experiences and bilateral relations. Chapter 5 'The United States and Japan, 1945–1965', for example, details economic, political and social aspects of US-Japanese relations from a variety of perspectives. It misses, however, the crucial place that Japan occupies in the United States' attempt to create a system of containment based on interlocking treaties in Asia. The documents do not represent the larger American strategy in the region and Japan's pivotal role in that strategy, and instead focus almost exclusively on bilateral relations.

A global history of the Cold War – stretching around the globe and over a half century – is an ambitious, if almost impossible, task. While historians will inevitably approach such a project with their own wish lists, and hence critiques of what is *not* included, *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* provides an excellent survey of the main contours of the conflict and offers new perspectives on now familiar stories of the Cold War. This book, with its focus on experiences rather than evaluation, makes it an ideal companion to a course on the Cold War era. It is also a valuable reference for those teaching this time period. For too long, historians have approached the Cold War from the perspective of the superpowers, missing the local variance and complexity beyond the United States and Soviet Union, an integral component in understanding this global conflict. There are many excellent historical works that now engage and incorporate this local complexity, and present a more diverse and international history of the Cold War. This volume takes those insights and applies them to a document collection, giving readers a fascinating window into the lived experiences and diverse thoughts of a global community in a global conflict. While this volume was not designed to stand alone to answer the 'why' of the Cold War, when read with more traditional texts, it will certainly enrich understandings of the conflict's meaning to people around the world, thereby loosening Cold War history from the control of the superpowers.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/535>

### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2951>